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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the complex issue of discipline in American public schools in order to understand its effect on the black student and his human development. Discipline is one of the major problems in the educational system today. In the past, parents and teachers attempted to control children with reward and punishment, with fear rather than respect. An increase in the incidence of rebellious and disruptive behavior in the schools indicates that the old ways of dealing with and raising children are no longer effective. A case study of a 15 year old probationer illustrates how a boy became delinquent for a variety of reasons, including, in part, the school system. The special plight of the minority student is that black youth are clearly implicated in the area of crime and violence. Many young black men in the nation's prisons have presented problems for their families since they were children. Black parents have an obligation to be supportive of their children when the child is in need of an adult's compassion and guidance. Educators can also help by recognizing the child's immediate goals. Teachers need to learn the art of encouragement. Black educators, in particular, must make a special effort to develop skills in bridging communication gaps between school and alienated youth. (Author/AM)

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EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE IN MAINTAINING RAPPORT with AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

The purpose of this paper is to examine the complexities of discipline in the public schools in America in order to understand its effect on the Black student and his human development. The areas covered here are three. First, after discussing discipline and disruptive behavior the sources and causes of them are traced. Secondly, I will emphasize the need for Black educators to act as vanguards in developing creative change in this major social problem in America. Thirdly, I will recommend specific techniques, programs, and methods that have proven to be effective in dealing with Black students.

Discipline is a very difficult word to define as it relates to the classroom because expectations of teachers are different. It is impossible to construct a set of guidelines that would be acceptable in most situations. Opinions about classroom control vary widely. Most classroom rules are based on moral, legal, personal, educational, and safety values of teachers. Misbehavior and disciplinary problems usually occur whenever a student breaks one of the classroom rules that have been determined by the teacher and/or the school authorities.

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Discipline is one of the major problems in our education system today. In the national Gallup polls on education the public consistently places school discipline as its primary concern.[1] The principle reason for this concern is our common desire to establish and maintain an environment that will allow each student an opportunity to maximize his human potential in the classroom. I will tell you what is wrong with the public schools in America. To begin:

> The teachers are afraid of the principals;
> The principals are afraid of the superintendents;
> The superintendents are afraid of the school boards;
> The school boards are afraid of the parents;
> The parents are afraid of the children; and
> The children, heaven help us, are not afraid of anyone.[2]

In looking seriously at the concept of discipline; unfortunately, to many educators, the word sounds like a code for "punishment"; and there is ample evidence that punishment is incompatible with education--at least in any of its more creative and humane aspects. Punishment does tend to extinguish certain behaviors so long as the punisher is physically present or the fear of "getting caught" is great. However, punishment also extinguishes independence, responsibility, and creativity while at the same time engendering hostility and resentment toward the punisher, the school system, and the educative process itself. As Mark Twain said, "The cat who sits on the hot stove won't sit on a hot stove again, but then he probably won't sit on a cold one either." Our prisons and reformatories are overcrowded with recidivists who have been punished time and time again, but to no avail.[3]

We have to realize that we need new ways of dealing with and of raising children because the old ways are no longer effective. We need new ways of dealing with children in our schools because we simply can no longer run schools for the children but we must run our schools with the children.

I am not recommending that we actually allow the students to run the schools, as they may be doing now anyhow. However, it is the students themselves who decide whether they want to study and behave. We have some excellent teachers as long as the students want to study and behave themselves. These same teachers are "at a loss" when the student decides he does not want to study and behave.

Parents and teachers still try to control children with reward and punishment. They think the child does not know better. If you give a child a reward, he does not consider that an expression to which he should be grateful. When you give him a reward, he considers that his right, and he will attempt little else until another reward is coming to him. Let us look at punishment again. It is true that punishment can be effective, but only with children who do not need it. The imposing of punishment may have a momentary effect, but the next minute you have to punish again.

We have to learn to treat children with respect. In our society we operate on the principle of mutual respect when interacting with each other as adults, but when dealing with children this principle does not apply. The relationship that I am suggesting is one based on kindness and firmness. When we are kind and polite, we are expressing respect for the child, and when we are firm and straightforward, we are expressing respect for ourselves. It is often difficult to be both kind and firm when dealing with young people. Many times we are kind but not firm or firm but not kind in our relationships with youngsters.

Very often we as adults confuse the concept of respect with fear. We think that if a child fears us he therefore respects us and we often demand this respect as we become too firm. We fail to realize that respect is an honor that is earned by us through our healthy relationships with youngsters, not by how much power we "wield" in our interactions with them.

The failure to realize this fact has resulted in the teenage rebellious years in our society. Many children are controlled by an authoritative use of power by adults until they reach the stage of adolescence. At this period of development in their lives, youngsters are not as dependent on adults for the reward adults have been using for years. Youngsters are no longer dependent on adults for friendship because the childhood peer group has now replaced this need to be accepted. The adolescent is also large enough to physically rebel by fighting or by running away.[4]

I will now share with you some of my experiences as a juvenile probation officer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and in Bridgeport, Connecticut. These experiences included four years in Philadelphia and three years in Bridgeport respectively. The majority of my case-loads in both cities included extremely low-income Black and Puerto Rican boys whose offenses ranged from truancy to armed robbery and murder. My average case-load in each city was ninety-five. Because about ninety percent of the boys had very serious problems in school, I found a gread deal of my time being spent in elementary, junior high, and high schools dealing with the principals and teachers of these boys whose ages ranged from eight to eighteen years.

This daily experience of interacting and being in constant dialogue with teachers and administrators was a learning experience for me that I can never replace. This experience was just as rewarding as the several years of graduate school that I subsequently faced on my mysterious journey to becoming a college professor. It was through interacting with the educators of my probationers that I discovered just how ill-prepared the schools were in providing an education for the low-income so-called "disruptive" child. Time and time again I was made to feel like an attorney for my boys as I tried to convince the "judges" (educators) that my boys deserved a chance in school. Many times young boys who wanted to belong were "pushed out" of

school because incompetent teachers and administrators labeled them as disruptive troublemakers even at age eight. It was not uncommon to have a boy referred to the juvenile court for a delinquent offense and find that he had been expelled from school for several months or even several years at a young age. Expulsion in these cases simply gave them the freedom to roam the streets and become even more delinquent.

I also found it quite common for many of my boys to appear to be transferring many of their agressive feelings of rejection by these teachers and administrators to innocent adults in our society. Very often little or no remorse was shown for violent offenses such as muggings or pursesnatchings which were perpetrated upon adults who strongly resembled a boy's teacher or principal. It was quite inevitable that many of the boys would commit a serious delinquent offense in the community after being constantly rejected by the school system.

A perfect example of the above transference phenomenon reminds me of a fifteen-year-old probationer named Allen. Al's mother brought him to my office on her own because of his constant incorrigibility at home. Al was the second oldest of six in a fatherless home. Mom was pleading for help because Al was too "mannish" and he had not been to school in two years. Upon investigation I found that Al was expelled by the school system when he was thirteen and placed on "homebound" instruction. Although Mother and Al had never seen an instructor, the school system stated that the assigned instructor would never find Al at home. I talked Al's local principal into giving the boy a chance at his school again. About three days after Al tried school, I received a call from the principal stating that Al was being suspended from school for threatening to shoot a teacher with a pistol. As the principal talked, I could hear Al angrily protesting in the background that he was treated unfairly. I spoke to Al and asked him to come to my office right away. Al came on the bus within a few minutes and we talked at length.

Al protested that he was used to wearing his hat all the time and therefore he had it on after coming into his ninth grade class after lunch. A young teacher known to be the self-appointed disciplinarian of all "troublemakers" in the school, knocked his hat off in front of all the other kids. Al was embarrassed and angered and therefore retaliated with the threat.

Two days later, over the weekend, Al and four older boys were arrested for mugging a drunken man who strongly resembled the disciplinarian in Al's school. Al inflicted most of the physical punishment on the victim and the man died on the way to the hospital. Upon interviewing Al on the next day in the youth detention facility, I found that he showed little remorse for his offense. As a matter of fact, I had to talk Al into releasing stolen money that he admitted taking from the deceased victim. Al stated that he should be able to keep the money because he was going to jail to pay for what he had done. As I drove Al to the residential youth facility for juvenile offenders which took about one hour, we had a meaningful talk. Al did finally shed tears in explaining that he really wanted to "make it" in school and in life and that he was really sorry that the man had died. Al was released after about one year and we became rather close. He never did go back to school nor did he "make it" in life. Al met a violent death at the age of seventeen in an effort to protect his mother from her boyfriend.[5]

I feel that the above-mentioned case involved a boy who became a delinquent because of various reasons of which none can be isolated as the sole cause. However, I believe the school system would have to accept some responsibility for being one of the factors that led to Al's deviant behavior. The isolated incident which resulted in Al's last day in school is a perfect example of an insensitive educator with a college degree who used poor judgement in "disciplining" my friend, Al. Not to even mention the "cultural conflict" between Al and this young Caucasian teacher in regard to the

importance of Al's respected hat or "sky piece" which was knocked off in front of "the boys". Many educational careers of young Black teenagers are ended daily in America by young incompetent educators who think that the only thing a young Black teenager respects is violence and power exhibited by an adult. A study by the Children's Defense Fund revealed that in proportion to enrollment, suspensions hurt more children who are Black, poor, older, and male. Most striking is the disparate suspension of Black school children; they are suspended at twice the rate of any other group. Twenty school districts reported suspending one-third to one-half of their Black students; one district suspended 64%; another 53%. Survey data and interviews make it plain that they are part and parcel of a pervasive intolerance by school officials for children who are different in any number of ways. Suspensions are often imposed arbitrarily, without affording the student an opportunity to explain, or without giving his or her parents an opportunity to be contacted. Suspension pushes children and their problems into the street, thereby causing more problems for them and for the rest of us.[6]

You may ask what kind of problems does it present for the rest of us? This answer is relative to the priorities you have as they relate to your values of the future for Blacks in America. For me, I feel that our future is dependent upon the human growth and development of the Black male as the carrier of our culture and identity. As of this writing our young Black men are not faring so well in America. It is in the area of crime and violence that Black youth are clearly implicated. The largest numbers of crimes against the person and acts of theft were committed by Black males under the age of 24. A majority of all homicide victims in the United States last year were Black and the perpetrator of the crime typically was a young Black male between the ages of 20 and 24.[7] Hence, it is of little surprise that the number one cause of death among Black males aged 15-30 is homicide.[8] In Detroit, the homicide rate among Black males is so high that the average life

expectancy rate among Black males actually declined 2.6 years in the last decade.[9]

Although Allen was the victim of an untimely homicide, I could have shared innumerable accounts of very dramatic and touching stories about some of my young friends who are now incarcerated for serious crimes. Many of their histories of school adjustment include some traumatic experiences with disciplinarians who could not effectively deal with them. In 1972 Black inmates were 42% of the nation's jail population when Blacks represented only about twelve percent of the total nation's population. Most of them are young, poorly educated, low paid wage earners or unemployed prior to their arrest. Some 51% were under the age of 24. Fifty percent of the prisoners sentenced to death are Black.[10]

Many young Black men who are incarcerated in our nation's prisons have presented problems for their families since they were children in grade school. Parents have had to "trudge" up to school time and again to deal with their child's disciplinary problems. The school problems would lead to court problems and finally to incarceration itself. Naturally this would cause frustration, anger, and rejection of the child by the parent who eventually loses hope in the child and is blinded of all reason toward the youngster's behavior. This poem, which was written by an inmate in Attica State Prison in New York, illustrates this rejection of a young man by his father:

Daddy, Daddy come dig me
Daddy dig yourself and me
This trick mirror reflection of what you and mama did
Daddy dig the kid. Blown by the reckless winds of youth over
high roof-tops of reality to the funky flop house, Truth!
Daddy cross the gray wall of years to my lonely house of tears.
Daddy come see about me

Come dig the son; come forgetting what I've done.

Daddy, my Daddy, my father of me

Show me the way out--how to be free

Daddy don't forget to bring all the answers with you

Your son is uptight, you've got to tell me what to do

Daddy pull my coat. Tell me what it's all about.

I was born with a rope around my throat; but they won't let

your son hangout

Hey! there's a big white cat laid back fat broadcasting our

blues with a bulletin in the news saying, "Nigger get out of my

world right now."

And Daddy, Daddy if you read between the lines he's even telling us

how. Papa the man is slick. He's got a birth control trick. Papa I

can plainly see the man is popping pills to mama, so she can't make

more me.

For us here and now, he's got another plan--slave labor--prison

Daddy you better come dig this son you made

Daddy you better come rappin' cool 'cause your son is afraid.

Papa, I'm youth and youth is action and fear can

produce an uncool reaction. Have me throwing a Pepsi-Cola bottle at

a National Guard's face. Have

me throwing fire bombs all over the place.

Daddy, blind cold fingers of fear bury all common

sense and logic alive; killing all my needs except my need to

survive. Same fear that could make me throw a fire bomb could destroy

loyalty to race and people and make your son an Uncle Tom.

Daddy fear might separate me from the rest

Have me thinking that what I'm doing is best.

Have me as a brainwashed soldier in Mozambique--

Huh--fighting a war and acting like a freak.
Daddy, don't let fear do this to me
Daddy, my Daddy come see about me.
Why pain to Mama at my birth
If I was born to suffer even worse
Daddy, mother f--k my evil ways
Those are only scars I received in my younger days.
Soft as a clam without his tough shell,
When I was young, Daddy it was hell!
It was roaches in Rice Krispies alive and running about. There was nothing else to eat so it was wise to pick them out.
It was too many in the bed, so I had to sleep on the floor
It was real milk this morning, but now there ain't no more
It was starting out right and ending wrong--locked in a cell. To tell it like it is Daddy it was Hell.[11]

Black parents have an obligation to be supportive of their children when the child is in need of an adult's compassion and guidance. Even when the child is obviously "wrong", we cannot afford to turn our backs on our offspring when they need us most. We are not condoning a child's behavior just because we support him in time of need. Every child is a human being and he wants to belong to a family. This is the natural order of all living creatures. When the child is willing to do what is necessary to be accepted by the family, we love him; however, when he misbehaves we put labels on him. We say, "he is trifling," "he is a bum" or a "hoodlum"; all kinds of labels which do not actually explain anything. Parents must seek out the reason for a child's misbehavior. A child may constantly keep you worried, for in his mind he has a place only when you keep worrying about him. He prefers to be scolded or punished rather than being ignored.

Many times we adults strike out at youngsters in a "fit of anger", not realizing the serious damage we may be inflicting upon our relationship with the child. Edgar Allan Poe said, "Years of love are lost in the hatred of a moment." We must realize that this anger is usually a secondary feeling we have which follows some kind of primary feeling in us such as hurt, embarrassment, fear, disappointment, jealousy, or mistreatment. Anger is often the vehicle we use to hide our true (primary) feeling. Anger is often the way we try to punish another person for causing this primary feeling.

We as adults must stop and ask ourselves, "Why am I so angry?" "What do I really feel?" And then--Why not try to express our primary feeling which may cause the child to feel genuinely remorseful? Many times when we physically or verbally punish a child, he no longer feels sorry for his deviant behavior. It is very difficult for the child to develop a concern for your feelings after you hurt or embarrass him, especially if this is done in front of others. Instead of concern, the child feels resentment toward the adult which perpetuates an unhealthy relationship between the two parties.[12]

The relationship we establish with the child determines whether he will be motivated to behave positively or negatively. We need to know how to motivate the child to cooperate, to function, to respect others, and to take on his share of the responsibility. Understanding the child's motivation is one of the basic requirements for a new approach to children. When our authority alone is used, a concern with motivation was not needed.

Educators need more training in recognizing the child's immediate goals. If the teacher does not understand the child's goal, the educator can become a victim of the child's unconscious "scheme", rather than his guide.

Finally, teachers need to learn the art of encouragement. This term is widely and lightly used. Encouragement is more than just praise. Ac-

tually, praise can be detrimental if the child feels it is undeserved. The art of encouragement presupposes sincere faith in the child as he is, not in his potential or what he could be. Every child needs encouragement as a plant needs water, but unfortunately only those who do not really need it get it a great deal in our schools today. A child cannot build on his weaknesses, but only on his strengths. Let us remember this in improving the educational system for the African-American student.[13]

The disciplinary problems facing urban schools are not being noticeably solved by Black educators. As stated earlier in this paper, many of our Black administrators are being used by the system of "miseducation" as "gatekeepers" who come in direct contact with disruptive students. Many of these educators must be careful not to lose their identity or rest their entire cause and social status on white recognition and acceptance. They must make a special effort to develop the above mentioned skills in bridging the "communication gap" between school and the alienated youth. Most important of all they must be obligated to decrease the disproportionate percentage of Black youth dropping out of school and being suspended.

In our upward movement to lead comfortable lives, we tend to avoid Blacks lower than ourselves. We forget our roots and from "whence we came". Thus, it is not uncommon to encounter Black professionals who are less accepting of lower-class Blacks than are white professionals. As a result, many Black administrators and educators may be more punitive toward students of their own race than toward white students. When a member of our own race deviates from accepted standards, some Blacks see the behavior as a reflection on the race as a whole, and, more importantly, on themselves.

We must learn to accept the student as he is, not as he will be or could be. This means the educator must accept the Black, foul-mouthed individual or the angry, embittered one.

As social and economic conditions continue to deteriorate in this country, ghetto-dwellers are forced to adjust to their oppressive situations.

The educator may find it progressively difficult to accept the culturally different, no matter how hard he tries. When he does, it is time for self-evaluation and maybe a transfer, because, just as we are careful to "handpick" specialists to work with the handicapped, we must be just as careful to "handpick" those who work with the "hardcore disadvantaged" student.

There has been a failure of school officials to provide the community with needed educational strategies and tactics for successful Black adaptation to a hostile environment. If the necessary strategy had been developed, then there would be no need for a Black plan for survival in the school system. Dr. Kenneth Clark, a Black educator and one of America's most distinguished social psychologists stated that it now appears that the present system of organization and functioning of urban schools has become the chief blockage in the mobility of the masses of Black and other lower status minority group children. Dr. Clark said in this interview with the Bilalian News on July 9, 1976, that public schools in our Northern urban centers are no longer the instruments and tools for upward mobility in our system but have become breeding grounds for frustration, despair, self destruction, and social instability. He added that publication for Blacks had entered a dangerous period of stagnation, if not regression.[14]

At the 4th Annual Conference of the National Alliance of Black School Educators in Miami, Florida in November 1976, Dr. Harry Morgan, Director of Afro-American Studies and professor of education at Syracuse University was a keynote speaker. Dr. Morgan addressed his remarks to "Precocity, Hyperactivity, and Knowledge Acquisition of Black Children". He stated that the United States' school system may actually promote Black student disruption in the classroom by fostering a so-called "quiet behavior norm" which favors white children over Black. Dr. Morgan declared that today, past the third grade, education is failing the Black child. He added that it is common knowledge that schooling in America has many defects. He called for a restructuring of classrooms to eliminate the so-called "third grade syndrome" where open,

flexible classrooms of Kindergarten to second grade are abruptly replaced by the traditional desk-bound setting. It is here that the higher level of sensorimotor in the Black child manifests itself in behavior which is interpreted as disruptive. Performance levels for Black children appear to decline steadily after the third grade as the quiet-atmosphere classroom is introduced. The next step is the children being labeled as hyperactive and placed on medication. There are now about two million school children in America on drug therapy. Morgan suggests a humanistic, open individualized learning situation for all students.[15]

Dr. Kenneth Clark feels that if American democratic society is to prevail, we must redouble our efforts and energy in desegregating public schools. He feels that the segregated school makes it impossible for white children to come to grips with the reality that two-thirds of the peoples of the world are non-white and that they are no longer silent, passive, and subordinate. These two-thirds will have to be dealt with as peers.[16]

I am recommending thar Black students, parents, and teachers come together in unity. Youth are constantly being encouraged to forget they are Black, and to adapt quickly, the cultural characteristics of the white society. The quicker this happens, the quicker they will win acceptance. Above all, the emphasis is on the individual. We must emphasize that the Black student be responsible to his peer group and to his community. This collective consciousness can be described as a vital attitude for solidarity toward developing self and community. This community spirit is part and parcel of the Black man's heritage and culture. This corporate responsibility will help design a collective destiny so that when one member of the community suffers, the entire community suffers. When he succeeds, we all succeed. There would be a return to the old African tradition of "I am because we are, and because we are, I am."

FOOTNOTES

[1]Phi Delta Kappan. "The Gallup Polls of Attitudes Toward Education 1973", Stanley Elam, ed. (Bloomington, Indiana, 1973).

[2]James B. Spurlock, "Do Virginia Public Schools Contribute to the Disruptive Youth Problem?" State Conference on Disruptive Youth, April 2, 1975.

[3]Lee Trucks, "Discipline Without Punishment in Schools: Hard-Headed Humanism" (Baldwin, Mi.: Effectiveness Training Associates, 1976), p. 4.

[4]Thomas Gordon, T.E.T.: Teacher Effectiveness Training, (New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1974), p. 198.

[5]Bridgeport Post, May 30, 1969, p. 1.

[6]School Suspensions - Are They Helping Children?, Report by the Children's Defense Fund of the Washington Research Project, Inc. (Washington, D. C.: September, 1975), p. 10.

[7]U. S. Bureau of the Census,"The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States, 1974", Washington, D. C. Government Printing Office 1975, p. 17 in The Black Scholar: "To Be Young, Black and Oppressed", Robert Staples, (Sausalito, California: Black World Foundation, December 1975), p. 6.

[8]Lee N. Robins, "Negro Homicide Victims - Who Will They Be?", Transaction, 5 (June 1968), pp. 15-19 in The Black Scholar: ibid, p. 6.

[9]"Report of the Center for Health Statistics of the Michigan Department of Public Health," quoted in Jet, April 5, 1973, p. 33, in The Black Scholar: ibid, p. 6.

[10]U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1974, op. cit., pp. 164-176 in The Black Scholar: ibid, p. 6.

[11]Obawayo, "From These Cold Jaws of Prison," Folkways Records and Service Corporation, 701 Seventh Avenue, NYC, U.S.A.

Footnotes (continued)

[12]See Gordon, Dr. Thomas and Noel Burch, Teacher Effectiveness Training, (New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1974) for a relevant discussion of put-down messages.

[13]ibid.

[14]Silalian News, July 9, 1976, p. 15.

[15]ibid., December 3, 1976

[16]op. cit.